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# The Geopolitical Imaginary of the Brazilian Ultra-Right

JORGE GOMES DE SOUZA CHALOUB

*Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

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The strengthening of the ultra-right in the Brazilian political scenario has a certain geopolitical imagination as one of its centres. Its main authors, on the one hand, consider Latin America as something to be avoided, and, on the other hand, value the affinities between Brazil and the United States due to the idea of a mutual belonging to a Christian West. The present article explains the most current assumptions and arguments of this discourse after 2016, based on an analysis of the geopolitical imaginary of the Brazilian ultra-right. The text reconstructs three political languages of the field – the reactionary, the ultraliberal, and the authoritarian conservative, based on the analysis of four intellectual protagonists: Olavo de Carvalho, Ernesto Araújo, Paulo Guedes, and Eduardo Villas Bôas. Finally, we raise some hypotheses about the reasons for the longevity of some fundamental traits of this geopolitical imaginary in the Brazilian scenario.

Keywords: Brazil, Latin America, reactionary, ultraliberalism, authoritarian conservatism, ultra-right.

On 28 October 2018, Paulo Guedes gave his first interview to the international press after Jair Bolsonaro's victory in the Brazilian presidential election. The economist had already been appointed by the future president as one of his 'super ministers', and, according to Bolsonaro's own statements, he would have complete freedom in office. The future minister was one of the great guarantors held up by the government before the national bourgeoisie and some media, such as the Globo group, for which Guedes had written weekly for eleven years.

The interview therefore carried the weight of an official declaration of intentions from the new government. After the announcement, faithful to his ultraliberal agenda, that his initial objectives were to attack the fiscal deficit and 'open up the economy', Guedes caused the first of many diplomatic crises for the government when he reacted to a question from journalist Eleonora Gosman, from the Argentine newspaper *O Clarin*, about Mercosur. With his aggressive rhetoric, Guedes claimed: 'Mercosur is very restrictive. Brazil was a prisoner of ideological alliances. And that's bad for the economy' (*Clarín*, 2018). When questioned if the block still held ideologically, Guedes continued in his reasoning:

It will not be so with us, but it was ideological. In the sense that you only negotiate with people who have Bolivarian inclinations. [...] No, Argentina is not a priority. Mercosur is not a priority either. (*Clarín*, 2018)

The statements are a symptom of the importance of a discourse against Latin America for the contemporary Brazilian ultra-right. The mention of 'Bolivarian inclinations' is not an exception in the group of which Guedes is one of the protagonists, but the resumption of a relevant theme for the construction of its political identity. An old motto of the Brazilian right has resurfaced in recent decades, which sees in the 'Latin Americanization' of Brazil a path of disorder, anarchy, and crisis (Carvalho, 1999; Bethell, 2009), counterposed by a certain idealisation of a Western imaginary, represented by the United States. The standardisation of these diverse experiences often ended up lumped together in the vague categories of populism and Bolivarianism.

The theme did not emerge in the conjuncture of the voices of the ultra-right but was frequent in the editorials of the major newspapers and in the speeches of the centre-right and right. The electoral victories of a series of progressive governments in South America produced as one of its consequences the strong presence of foreign policy in the Brazilian public debate. Negative mentions of Venezuela, Argentina, and Bolivia became frequent in the pages of the mainstream press and in electoral disputes, while the United States appeared, in most of these analyses, as a model for Brazilian society.

This article intends to reflect on the current forms of this discourse based on the analysis of the geopolitical imaginary of three political languages of the ultra-right – the reactionary, the ultraliberal, and the authoritarian conservative – and of four of its intellectual protagonists: Olavo de Carvalho, Ernesto Araújo, Paulo Guedes, and Eduardo Villas Bôas. Finally, the article will consider some hypotheses about the reasons for the longevity of certain characteristics of this geopolitical imaginary in the Brazilian political scenario.

By ultra-right, I define the actors whose speeches or practices confront, from a radical and ostensible right-wing identity, the foundations of the hegemonic democratic order in the post-1945 period and, consequently, of the democracy established in Brazil from the 1988 Constitution. It is a heterogeneous field, built from the composition of different political languages – such as the ultraliberal, the neoconservative, and the reactionary – which finds its unity in the construction of the left as an enemy, in the classic sense of Carl Schmitt, and in the defence of a radical change in the social order. Criticism of Latin America and praise of the United States find different foundations in each of these political languages, sometimes appearing as a mistaken economic strategy and, at other times, as an immediate project to implement an authoritarian order. Despite the differences in emphasis and the distinct consequences, the distinctions do not prevent these geopolitical imaginations from having deep elective affinities, which end up contributing, as in the Bolsonaro government, to the construction of a single political coalition.

Political languages are defined as sequences of arguments and worldviews that gain meaning from the political dispute and, therefore, both justify past acts and motivate future actions. Languages are not mere occasional calculations, which would end up limiting worldviews to the present and undervaluing the place of ideas, but they are also not to be confused with intellectual structures that are completely autonomous in the face of current movements. To understand them, it is essential to pay attention to their relational dimension, since they are defined based on the link with other languages and their uses in different contexts. It should be noted that the ultra-right is not a watertight field, but that it both encompasses actors who restrict their political trajectory to this position, and receives individuals and political groups who, through a process of radicalisation to the right of their positions, enter this new political-ideological space.

It is necessary to point out that even though this political field takes up classic arguments from the geopolitical imagination of the Brazilian right, there are, on the other hand, novelties from the point of view of the style of public argumentation, the intellectual influences and the place of these discourses in political action. If in the period prior to the 1964 coup, the Peronist danger was often identified with communism, which served as a justification for the military coup, the geopolitical imaginary of alignment with the United States did not coexist with the construction of something close to an international ultra-right, such as defended by characters like Steve Bannon and by several leaders of the Jair Bolsonaro government. The National Democratic Union (UDN) and the military aligned to the right flirted with authoritarian arguments, but they did not have ultra-right rhetorical and theoretical mottoes at the centre of their speeches. The originality of the current work is justified by the in-depth analysis of this field, since there is still no intellectual map of this geopolitical imaginary in Brazil. The present article, on the other hand, seeks to advance, based on the Brazilian case, the debate already initiated by works that reflect on the construction of an ultra-right political imaginary (Barbosa Jr. and Casarões, 2023; Cowan, 2018; Grumke, 2013; Stewart, 2020).

The choice of the four intellectuals was made through criteria of public relevance and representativeness of each of the political languages. The bibliography on the growth of right-wing and ultra-right ideology in Brazil (Bianchi et al., 2020; Rocha, Solano and Medeiros, 2021) points to the centrality of neoconservative, neoliberal, and reactionary ideologies for the construction of Bolsonaroism and the current Brazilian political scenario. There is no doubt that the authors analysed here are political and intellectual leaders in the field, having not only led political movements but also systematically reflected

on such an effort. Olavo de Carvalho is the most influential intellectual in the field of the ultra-right in Brazil, while Ernesto Araújo, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, was the one who most directly acted on the shift towards the ultra-right in Brazilian foreign policy. Both are representatives of a particular amalgamation between reactionaryism and conservatism. Eduardo Villas Bôas, in turn, was the most active leader and public intellectual in the military field in the period between the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff and the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who publicly recognised Bôas as central to his electoral victory. He updates, from the ultra-right repertoire, the authoritarian conservatism of the 1964 Civil-Military Dictatorship. Finally, Paulo Guedes was not only a ‘super minister’ of the Bolsonaro government, but an influential public intellectual of libertarian inspiration and an articulator of the field of neoliberal *think tanks* in Brazil. It is difficult to imagine more representative names for the scope of the present analysis.

## The Reactionary Language: Olavo de Carvalho and Ernesto Araújo

The theme of infiltration is a classic element of the Brazilian anti-communist tradition (Motta, 2002). Olavo de Carvalho not only recovers aspects of this discourse but seeks to update it. An intellectual of great influence in the Brazilian right wing and an author revered by President Jair Bolsonaro, who had his book in his hands when speaking after confirming his electoral victory, Carvalho has extensive experience in social networks and former links with relevant elements of the Brazilian economic elite. He is not only responsible for ‘appointing’ ministers, including two of education, but he has unquestionable ascendancy over the active family nucleus of President Jair Bolsonaro. In the discourse around the country’s relations with the world, Carvalho has great authority over the three most active names in building the country’s foreign policy over the first two years of government: Chancellor Ernesto Araújo, presidential adviser Felipe Martins, and Eduardo Bolsonaro, the son of the president, who is most active on the subject.

For Carvalho, the hegemonic actor in the contemporary world would be what he calls the ‘Consortium’, an ‘organisation of large capitalists and international bankers, committed to establishing a socialist world dictatorship’ (Carvalho and Dugin, 2011: 48). This dynastic organisation emerged over 100 years ago at the initiative of the Rothschilds and would bring together hundreds of billionaires interested in implementing socialism.

According to Carvalho, the socialists soon realised that they had two possible paths to socialism: a bloody dictatorship, through revolution, or a gradual method, operated through the legal-political apparatus of bourgeois society, with the help of international organisations, such as the UN, IMF, and WHO. The ideology of this second process would be globalism, a discourse that seeks to subjugate both national states and individual freedom to this global order, dominated by these billionaires and aligned with the interests of China and Russia. The speech follows, in part, the line of other narratives of prominent intellectuals of the contemporary global ultra-right, such as Steve Bannon and Alexandr Dugin (Teitelbaum, 2020), critics of the post-1945 global order and, more broadly, of the foundations of Western modernity such as secularisation and the Enlightenment. References to traditionalists such as Rene Guénon and Julius Evola are evident in all of them, and textually mentioned in Carvalho and Dugin.

While the other two theorists oppose a world of civilisations and nations to liberal globalism, Carvalho is a strong defender of a universalism that, however, is not to be confused with the Enlightenment, but takes on an anti-secular character and gives religions a central role in the global order (Carvalho and Dugin, 2011: 62–63). The conjunction between the aversion to nationalism and universalism is present in his use of the concept of the West, close to authors such as Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Excessive materialism and the loss of spiritual foundations in the West would be responsible for a process of civilisational decay, which can only be interrupted by a return to these spiritual roots.

Carvalho builds a direct relationship between the West and the United States of America, or, it would be better to say, a certain representation of the United States of America. Differently from one of the more frequent conservative and fascist formulations in Brazilian thought, the Brazilian ultra-right ideologue does not necessarily identify the United States with materialism, but sees it as a fundamentally Christian homeland, with strong community traits, great generosity, and a peculiar arrangement

capable of reconciling individual freedom with a sense of solidarity with one's neighbour. Americans, however, would also be victims of a process of globalist infiltration by communists, represented not only by the great billionaires, but by 'left' politicians, such as former President Barack Obama. To justify this narrative, Carvalho opposes globalist America to a true America, in tune with the ideas of 'American conservative nationalism', which would make up, alongside the Christian communities and the Jewish nation, one of the three groups with global narratives that were dominated, in the current situation, by the hegemonic forces of globalism, namely, 'the Russian-Chinese militarists, the Western oligarchs, and the apostles of the Universal Caliphate' (Carvalho and Dugin, 2011: 54). He concludes: 'The US is not the command center of the globalist project, but, on the contrary, its priority victim, marked for death' (Carvalho and Dugin, 2011: 54).

Carvalho takes up a certain conspiracy motto from the early 1950s in the United States (Hofstadter, 1964), directly related to McCarthyism, in a scenario in which the rhetoric of conspiracy sounds even more ingenious and founded on less obvious aspects. He advances, however, towards a worldview that is, on the one hand, reactionary in its narrative about modernity, and, on the other hand, conservative, in its action around some of the main themes of the ultra-right, such as the reflections around the family, sexuality, and the state, among others. It is undeniable that he finds inspiration in North American conservatism and neoconservatism (Vaisse, 2010; Phillips-Fein, 2011) – characters such as William Buckley and Russel Kirk – both in his arguments and in his style of public performance. However, the neoconservative style, which emulates the public polemicists of that scenario, sometimes hides the more truly reactionary facet of Carvalho, supported by the influences of reactionary and traditionalist authors, such as the already mentioned Guenon and Evola.

The distinction between the political languages of conservatism and reactionaryism is mainly supported by a certain sense of historicity and a precise concept of social change, since while the conservative tradition seeks to limit changes in the historical process, but accepts them as inevitable and, despite the important role of religiously based arguments, does not defend the full submission of politics to religion, the reactionary language is radically contrary to any idea of social transformation, advocates the return to distant historical moments, and sees the politics of men as a simple reflection of a superior order. Carvalho's reactionary verve leads him to reject the modern. Capitalism, praised by the author, is defined in an ethical key, as related to individual freedom and the refusal of collectivism, appearing as the only alternative to the terrible socialist option (Carvalho, 2013: 199–200).

For its modest contribution to universal culture, Brazil would be a propitious ground for the globalism of the Consortium. Even its Catholicism would be nothing more than a farce, considering the predominance of anti-Catholic elites during most of its history. The scenario of decay would deepen even more after the military dictatorship, when the left, with the complacency of the military, succeeded in excluding the right from all public debate:

the only people who were still conservative in Brazil were the mute people [...] The right exited national politics because, with the complacency and even the help of the military government, it was first banished from national culture. (Carvalho, 2012: 52)

With an intelligentsia marked by intellectual limitations and the inability to understand the world, Brazil became easy prey for the hegemonic strategy of the contemporary left: Gramscianism. Once hegemonic, Gramsci's thought reinforces the conditions that allowed its popularity, in an action that increases the mediocrity of the Brazilian intellectual scene. We are not facing a phenomenon of minor importance, but a profound change in Brazilian society

What Gramsci taught was to abdicate ostensible radicalism in order to widen the margin of alliances; to renounce the purity of apparent ideological schemes to gain efficiency in the art of enticing and compromising; to retreat from direct political combat into the deepest zone of psychological sabotage. [...] The formal or informal, conscious or unconscious conversion of the left intellectuals to the strategy of Antonio Gramsci is the most relevant fact in the national history of the last thirty years. (Carvalho, 1994: 4)

Anti-Americanism would be one of the woes of this decadent intellectuality, which imports the latest fashions from the American left, equally decadent, and is fragile in the face of external influences

from the Consortium: “Brazilian nationalism [ ... ] has degraded to the point of becoming a histrionic anti-Americanism used to cover up the sacrifice of national sovereignty to the demands of globalism” (Carvalho and Dugin, 2011: 55).

The critical discourse on Latin American integration is central to Carvalho’s political analysis and worldview, whose Foro de São Paulo is one of his most frequent and well-known topics. In Carvalho’s narrative, the forum of leftist parties and movements in Latin America is a paramilitary and strategic organisation, destined to take power in all countries of the continent, in which it had already been successful, since in 2007 it would dominate the government in nine countries (Carvalho, 2007). Carvalho has no doubt about the centrality and extension of this movement, which is evident:

That the Foro de São Paulo is a foreign, multinational entity, created in Havana by Fidel Castro and Lula [ ... ] and that one of the specialties of the Foro [ ... ] is to help leftist rulers interfere secretly in the internal politics of neighbouring countries – none of this is something that can reasonably be doubted. (Carvalho, 2014: 1)

Bolivarianism would be, in this sense, the most explicit face of an international articulation of globalist communism, inspired by Gramsci. The increase in ties between the Brazilian government and its Latin American neighbours is, therefore, a central element in the great plot of destruction of Christian and Western values through a left that articulates internationally and acts in the shadows.

Part of Carvalho’s influence is his ability to build disciples, who reproduce the general lines of his ideas. One of these, who played the most relevant role during the Bolsonaro government, was Ernesto Araújo. An undistinguished career diplomat, Araújo became better known after being chosen as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Jair Bolsonaro government, a position he held between January 2019 and March 2021.

In his inauguration speech, Araújo exhibited his intellectual connection to Olavo de Carvalho, defining him as the ‘man who, after President Jair Bolsonaro, is perhaps largely responsible for the immense transformation that Brazil is experiencing’ (Araújo, 2019). The chancellor cultivates a more inflated rhetoric, far from the colloquialism with which Carvalho builds even the arguments with more erudite references. There is, however, a great coincidence between the worldviews of both, who share a similar intellectual repertoire of rejection of modernity and secularisation. Araújo builds a scenario of loss of values and expansion of globalism perfectly consistent with Carvalho’s speech. On the other hand, his criticism of universalism and defence of values supported by nationality are at odds with those of his mentor, who was markedly universalist. Araújo, in this sense, is closer to traditionalism than his master.

The former minister defines the West as a community of Nations supported by values and experiences, something ignored by a ‘hyper-intellectualized and cosmopolitan elite’ (Araújo, 2017: 326). Political and social experiences would not occur in a global society, as intended by the Enlightenment with its liberal and revolutionary discourse, but within national communities, which do not dispense with religion, but rely on it. Trump, for Araújo, would be the leader of the return of the West to its roots, which go back to Aeschylus and to a supposed idea of ‘homeland’, already present in Greece. Araújo updates reactionary discourses of criticism of the French Revolution, constructed by authors such as Joseph de Maistre and Bonald. The most evident inspiration, however, is Spengler, whose idea about the decadence of the West he almost faithfully reproduces.

The ex-chancellor moves between two speeches. On the one hand, the West is a composite of national experiences, which share some values, while, on the other hand, these experiences only take place within well-defined borders. The ambiguous formulation of building a common West ‘starting from nationalities (and not above nationalities)’ (Araújo, 2017: 328) seems to be the best formula to reconcile his nationalist rhetoric, very close to Integralism, to the defence of a foreign policy strongly aligned with the United States.

From an essentialist idea of nationalism to the opposition between materialism and spiritualism, passing through the praise of the hero and even a certain use of the Tupi language, Araújo emulates several of the mottos of Integralism, a Brazilian movement of enormous popularity in the 1920s and 1930s with sensitive proximity to fascism. The search for the true Brazil, which has lost its identity, must, on the one hand, be sought within the country itself, which needs to resist the hegemonic globalist order. Quoting Trump, Araújo states:

Values only exist within a nation, within a culture, rooted in a nation, and not in some kind of abstract multilateral ether. The example, on the other hand, comes from outside of Donald Trump, 'who emerges as the savior of the West'. (Araújo, 2017: 332–333)

Araújo faithfully follows Olavo de Carvalho's interpretation of the United States, seen rather as a place of tradition, Christianity, and community than as the most complete example of capitalism and utilitarian logic. As a homeland, they wielded 'the flag of this dying West' (Araújo, 2017: 344) after the post-First World War European decay. Also threatened by globalism, they never stopped worshipping their heroes, for which they deserve all the admiration (Araújo, 2019), and recently they found in Trump a defender of the values of the true America built on community, religion, and, therefore, on the most expensive values in the West. In Araújo's interpretation, tensions between the United States and Russia would be increasingly smooth due to respect for sovereignty and national values, and aversion to multilateralism and globalism, advocated by the current American president.

At first glance, Araújo's anti-universalist nationalism and Olavo de Carvalho's universalism are at odds. The fundamental disagreement does not, however, prevent the convergence of more immediate objectives, such as the policy of alignment with the United States, represented as leaders of the West, and the rejection of globalism and Bolivarianism in the São Paulo Forum, an Olavist motto also present in the Chancellor's speech: 'We admire the Latin American countries that freed themselves from the regimes of the São Paulo Forum' (Araújo, 2019).

## **The Authoritarian Neoconservatism of Eduardo Villas Bôas**

The military was a fundamental part of the support base of the Jair Bolsonaro government. More than that, it is possible to affirm that they have been central actors in the Brazilian democratic crisis itself, especially after 2016, when they began to occupy central positions in the Brazilian state and to explicitly claim the role of 'moderating power' of the Republic. If, on the one hand, their demands resume the classic aspirations of the Brazilian Armed Forces, with clear parallels in other peripheral countries, on the other hand, some of these discourses take on new features in a national and global context in many different senses.

There is in the speeches of the main leaders of the Armed Forces an explicit influence of the vision of the country and the geopolitical imagination of some of the main military intellectuals of the Civil-Military Dictatorship, with emphasis on the thought of Golbery do Couto and Silva (2003). Hence, a narrative built during the Cold War, which reads the global order from the point of view of the confrontation between West and East, added to Brazil's Christian and capitalist background, situates the country as necessarily aligned with the Western field, naturally led by the United States. Efforts for autonomy in the international order, or for a Latin American identity not guided by North American repertoires, are seen as a potential adherence to the other side, which means that the nationalism of these actors is not marked by the idea of full independence, but for closing borders on the right side, the West. This is a binary view of the world, which divides it between natural allies and enemies.

Amidst the continuities, there are, however, new and important inflections. The long-standing anti-communism of the Armed Forces continues to make the communist the ideal prototype of the enemy, but it now takes on new features, built from a heterogeneous repertoire, which combines the cultural wars of North American conservatism and neoconservatism, the repertoire of Brazilian conservatism from the 1980s, and contemporary authors such as Olavo de Carvalho, who attended military debate environments for a long time.

Launched in 2021, based on thirteen hours of interviews granted in 2019 to the anthropologist Celso Castro, the testimonial book on Eduardo Villas Bôas, former Chief of Staff of the Brazilian Army and a central character in Bolsonaro's path to power, is a great entry to understanding the thinking of the elite of the Brazilian Armed Forces. The importance of the character and his declared obstinacy in transforming the testimony into a text for posterity are a great opportunity to better understand the thinking of the military, which even in a phase full of public statements, such as the current one, still limits its manifestations, due to institutional duty of office.

Throughout the more than 200 pages of the book, Villas Bôas makes clear the persistence of an imaginary of the Armed Forces as guardians par excellence of sovereignty and national interest, either because of their privileged knowledge of the country or because of their moral attributes, a moment in which the traditional motto of distinction, and consequent idea of superiority of the military in relation to civilians, becomes evident (Castro, 2021). This idea gains strength due to a feeling of loss of protagonism by the military, which, in the text, the general declares that he consciously sought to overcome. There also persists a rhetoric of imminent war and the centrality of anti-communism.

The evident rejection of the 'left' deserves two justifications, one for the past and the other for the present. When he goes back to the 1930s or post-1964, the general criticises the left for its lack of loyalty to morals and national values, which would split the country, and consequently, the Armed Forces themselves. Repeating old corporate mantras about the Communist Rising of 1935 or the armed struggle during the Civil-Military Dictatorship, he often portrays communists and leftists as those who betray, backstab. This vocabulary is also used by him to deal with the Truth Commission, which takes up issues from the past.

The enemy's features appear, however, quite different when contemporary themes do not mobilise history. At various times Villas Bôas directly attacks 'political correctness', seen as one of the great evils of contemporary society, and the foreign ideologies that seek to corrupt the feeling of national unity characteristic of Brazil. Dealing with the reasons for resistance against leftist actors and ideals, he sees 'political correctness' as a substitute for the defeated communist strategy in 1989:

Determining, too, was the fact that the left, with agendas emptied since the fall of communism, adhered to "political correctness". This set of thoughts spread throughout our society, stimulated by the militancy of the left. (Villas Bôas and Castro, 2021: 162)

Even for the less attentive reader, the echoes of Olavo de Carvalho's thought, exposed a few pages above, are impressive. Villas Bôas follows the theory of a shift in emphasis from the left, which Carvalho calls the Gramscian turn, and begins to interpret contemporary disputes around rights and representativeness as a new face of communism.

Environmentalism and the Indians occupy a prominent place in the construction of their enemies. Between fanciful narratives about the consequences of environmental demarcations and conspiracy theories about great hidden interests, Villas Bôas builds a representation of the world that opposes the Armed Forces, as the only ones who truly know the national territory and interpret national interests well, to the groups involved with other interests. The motto of the internal enemy, central to the Cold War and the Doctrine of National Security, is updated, now appearing linked to NGOs, the media, and the left-wing culture in general:

There was an orchestration involving the great press, government agencies, NGOs, and some indigenous leaders. [...] The demarcation promoted strong humanitarian dramas, keeping the proportions comparable to Stalin's programmes'. (Villas Bôas and Castro: 116–117)

The rhetorical mention of 'Stalin's programmes' is as absurd as it is illuminating of the way in which he sees his opponents. On the other hand, the conspiratorial tone of the story and the explicit opposition to traits of the post-1968 left, condensed in the critique of environmentalism, demonstrate the influence of the contemporary right and ultra-right repertoire.

The political order imagined by Villas Bôas seeks to resume traces of the authoritarian order of the dictatorship, guided by an idea of conservative modernisation (Fernandes, 2020), and adapt it to contemporary enemies, seen from their relations with the outside world and the repercussions of global geopolitical clashes in Brazilian society. Nothing is more symptomatic than the mention, which he makes in his testimony, of the signs of a 'new Cold War'. An insistent theme in its reconstruction of the past, it emerges as a metaphor for understanding the present and possible future horizons.

Just as the other Cold War made it necessary, in the eyes of the military, for a preventive coup to prevent the communists from supposedly coming to power, the imminent contemporary Cold War may, even with the praise voiced by the general for Brazilian institutions, suggest a similar path. Even

if he hypothetically accepts the return of the left to power, the general's entire narrative leads to the idea that this is not compatible with national values and interests.

When it comes to Bolsonaro, if Villas Bôas claims, on the one hand, that he does not represent the Army, on the other hand, he indicates that the former president open the doors to a necessary greater participation of the Armed Forces in public issues and decisions, as it owes its popularity to the fight against nefarious political correctness: 'Bolsonaro emphasised fighting political correctness, which the population was tired of. Globo, the realm of political correctness, was the most important electoral force for the president-elect' (Villas Bôas and Castro: 116–117). The passage reaffirms the role of the military as privileged interpreters not only of the national interest, but of the Brazilian people themselves.

If the Civil-Military Dictatorship, due to its modernising desire, cannot be easily related to classic conservatism, the political imagination of Villas Bôas, the most important spokesman for the military after redemocratisation, approaches the conservative camp more directly. The idealisation of the military past and of the dictatorship itself, the moral sense of the idea of tradition and defence of the Armed Forces as guardians of the nation make the general a beloved representative of an authoritarian conservative tradition, strongly influenced both by the traits of the past and by the new repertoire of contemporary right and ultra-right. Although his defence of institutions does not allow him to be easily framed in the field of the ultra-right, the structural incompatibility between his worldview and post-1945 democracy and his recent political movements make him a favourite representative of a traditional right that, in the face of a left electoral hegemony in the presidential elections, assumed an explicit process of radicalisation towards extremist positions.

## Paulo Guedes and Ultraliberalism

The conjunction between refusal of the Latin American path and alignment with the United States does not, however, come only from actors more accustomed to reactionary and authoritarian conservative languages. Within ultraliberalism, an influential current of the contemporary Brazilian ultra-right (Rocha, 2019), there is a strong concern to avoid the path of 'populism', which is discursively identified with the Latin American experience. A term as frequent as it is imprecise, populism is used mainly as a model of economic policy, even though there is a frequent relationship, in this discourse, between statist economic policies and a personalist style of political leadership.

Educated in Chicago, Paulo Guedes is closer to some libertarian currents, defenders of the almost unrestricted deregulation of the economic world and the pure predominance of individual freedom, than to neoliberal currents more concerned with the private regulation of the economy than with pure validity of the self-regulated market, hegemonic until the 1929 crisis (Dardot and Laval, 2010).

Concerns about 'Bolivarian' relations and influences are constant in his weekly columns, published between 2007 and 2018 in the newspaper *O Globo*, as well as in his public manifestations after his inauguration as the Minister of the Economy.

Guedes structures his speech around a radical opposition between the state and the market, taken as antithetical concepts both in the field of political-economic theory and in Brazilian political history. The state is usually linked to the ideas of inefficiency and corruption, in a narrative in which state action would always benefit corporations capable of taking over its resources. This process is seen by Guedes as a result of the nature of the closed system of the state, which makes it capable of controlling its values, as opposed to the predominance of the market, marked by what he calls, inspired by Karl Popper, the 'open society' (Guedes, 2013, 2017a). In order to achieve this new order and overcome the vicious cycle of decades of stagnation and corruption, it is necessary to break with the establishment:

the leadership in the economy and corruption in politics are associated. Public opinion would know, today, that on one side are the defenders of a degenerate establishment, and on the other side those who demand changes towards a Great Open Society in Brazilian lands. (Guedes, 2017b)

Roberto Campos had already diagnosed, according to Guedes, some time ago the announced death of the 'Brazilian political class', which would be devoured by the 'collapse of the dirigiste



interventionism', responsible not only for 'corruption' and 'economic stagnation', but also for social injustice: 'Old Politics is not only corrupt, but also unjust' (Guedes, 2017a). A break with it is necessary, after the failures of the right and the left:

The hegemonic 'right' ruled for two decades, and the hegemonic 'left' for three, both with a dirigiste economic model that was disastrous for the social and political development of the country. Low growth and systemic corruption marked the transition from state capitalism under military rule to gang capitalism under obsolete and unprepared social democracy. (Guedes, 2017b)

In his inaugural speech as the Minister of Economy, Guedes portrays the government as 'an alliance between conservatives, in principles and customs, and liberals in the economy', finally victorious 'after 30 years of centre-left political alliance' (Guedes, 2019). He does not ostensibly claim his belonging to the right, but rather postulates a certain technical superiority of his diagnoses. Hence his curious characterisation of the government as 'center-right'. Like Milton Friedman, his political economy, the terrain where social changes and value judgments are postulated, would be the best expression available for 'economic science', capable of understanding the world in a privileged way (Guedes, 2006).

The necessary changes will come from forces willing to build an 'open society', with the necessary centrality of the market order. The market has problems, but, according to Guedes, those could always be resolved within their own order. The strength of the mythology of cruel capitalism would hide the central responsibility of the state in producing a scenario of wealth concentration, economic crises, and corruption. More disastrous than capitalism would be its alternatives. If there are better and worse capitalist orders, the choice for the paths of the Latin American left would be certainly terrible:

The only inexorable path to the abyss, the true dead end chosen by our Kirchnerist and Bolivarian neighbors, is '21st century socialism.' The religious fervor of its believers stands up to the facts. It matters little that an apocalypse of the socialist regime has plunged 3.5 billion Eurasians into misery [...] Capitalism is always to blame. (Guedes, 2014)

Guedes's argument shows how, in his perspective, the experiences of the Latin American left differ little from those of the Soviets. The argument is consistent with his worldview, organised around a radical opposition between efficiency and inefficiency, corruption and reason, state and market. The narrative organised from binary pairs, radically opposed, gives the arguments a moral character and the author a missionary face, who fights against evil. If the great division of the world occurs between the state and the market, everything that is not economic liberalism, in its extreme version, becomes similar. Thus, without much mediation, communism, Nazism, fascism, Peronism, and Bolivarianism soon become an indistinct whole, which chooses the paths of politically and economically closed societies.

This is the premise of his argument when he defines the Brazilian labour and social security regimes as 'politically anachronistic, economically disastrous, and socially perverse', for having been formulated in 'closed political systems (in Bismarck's imperial Germany and in Mussolini's fascist Italy), and since then cultivated by obsolete social-democratic programmes' (Guedes, 2018). The argument emulates Mises and Hayek from 'The Road to Serfdom'.

As a result, Guedes builds two Latin Americas, one committed to closed societies, such as those that follow the path of Bolivarianism, and the other to the market, seen as synonymous with democracy:

On one side, in the Pacific belt, there are Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. Turning the crisis into an opportunity [...] they plunge their economies into global markets [...] On the other hand are Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina, on the wrong path of small, politically and economically closed societies. From the tragic Peronism of the 20th century to the Bolivarian socialism of the 21st century, empirical evidence is accumulated on a great disaster caused by obsolete ideologies. (Guedes, 2013)

We can then return to the statements from Guedes himself, reproduced at the beginning of this text. The rejection of Mercosur would be, in his conception, the rejection of obsolete ideologies, which impede the free course of individual reason. Economic liberalism, in turn, would not be an ideology,

but the faithful representation of the only realistic path to a free, efficient, and democratic society. For Guedes, the market is not just a way of organising the economy, but a political model applicable without mediation and even a scheme for the circulation of ideas.

The choice for open societies in Latin America is, therefore, a choice for capitalism, which does not build borders and only follows the course of efficiency. The alignment with the United States is not based on the idea of a culturally delineated West, as occurs in the mixture of reactionary and neoconservatism of Olavo de Carvalho and Ernesto Araújo, or even in the authoritarian conservatism of Eduardo Villas Bôas, but rather stems from an image of efficiency and free validity of the market, which has its extreme opposite in Bolivarianism.

The convergence in relation to the immediate practical objective can hide the different features of each of these praises for the West. As in other fields, the heterogeneous coalition, now organised around the Bolsonaro government, cannot hide, amid short-term convergences, fundamental differences, which may be relevant at other times. However, what would be the reasons for the convergence of this image of Latin America as a close enemy in different ideological and temporal perspectives?

## Final Considerations: The Persistence of a Discourse

This article aims to expose how the negative representations of Latin American countries, seen as *close enemies* or *misguided examples*, and of any alternative to alignment with the United States are relevant to build the geopolitical imagination and identity of the current Brazilian ultra-right.

The rhetoric of *threat* (Hirschman, 2019) is a characteristic of certain discourses on the right of the political spectrum and often builds enemies as a way of producing cohesion among its hosts. It is, moreover, a narrative that, due to its schematic and simple dimension, can be reproduced in different contexts and against different opponents, since the determination of the figure of this enemy pass through the representation of one's own identity. If the longevity of the discourse is due, in part, to its ability to adapt to different scenarios, the question remains open about the recurrence of the choice of Latin America, which consolidates itself as a type of *Near East* for the imaginary of the Brazilian right, in dynamics similar to some elements of orientalism, as described by Edward Said (2008).

The mention of the Latin American danger, which sometimes suggests a threat of imminent infiltration, and at other times emerges as an undesirable political path, is often related to the fear of possible ruptures in a context of emergence of the masses in politics. This fear often equates the revolutionary path, as in Cuba, with the implementation of national-popular reforms to reduce inequalities and inclusion, as during the thirteen years of PT governments.

The choice of Latin America reproduces on the global stage an internal hierarchical logic, so that the strong political-social inequality in the internal order would find a similar geopolitical hierarchy between Latin America, seen as politically and culturally peripheral, and the United States, represented as the natural centre. The homogenising argument of an external Latin American threat certainly says less about the countries represented than about the clashes around the implantation of a democratic order in Brazil.

From the discourse of the *Latin American threat*, it is possible to advance in the definition of the ultra-right in Brazilian political thought: in the midst of their differences, the field would have the understanding of the emergence of subaltern masses as a threat to the democratic order itself. While the more moderate right would oppose democratisation processes (Brown, 2019), understood as expanding the effective participation of groups in the dispute over public order, but would not attribute an anti-democratic character to them, the ultra-right would attribute an explicit anti-democratic nature to these movements. The radicalisation movements of a moderate right towards the ultra-right terrain, such as those that took place in Brazil in the last decade, can be partly understood by this type of public discourse.

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